

Washington, DC- Last night Congresswoman Gwen Moore (D-WI) reintroduced legislation to reauthorize national homelessness aid programs for the first time in 16 years. The measure would expand the statutory definition of homelessness in order to help those in dire straits who are nonetheless ineligible for assistance under current law.

“Far too many families are just one paycheck away from foreclosure or eviction,” Congresswoman Gwen Moore said. “As we continue to pass legislation that will help heal and grow our economy we must keep in mind the many families in our community who need housing help. These families are at grave risk of becoming homeless and we need to change the law to address that.”

Moore’s reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento homelessness law would expand the definition of what it means to be homeless and the resources and flexibility that local governments can use to serve those in danger of ending up on the streets.

First, in order to ensure that they can seek housing help in a time of need, Moore’s measure would guarantee that those who are fleeing from domestic violence, but with no place else to go, are counted as homeless and are eligible for homelessness assistance.

“Those trying desperately to escape abuse or even death at the hands of those in their current home should not be prevented from receiving shelter because of red-tape regulations. Current regulations incorrectly assume that domestic violence victims are not really ‘homeless’ simply because they don’t meet any other regulatory definition of homelessness,” Moore said.

Secondly, in addition to persons living on the street and in shelters, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), under current law, defines as homeless those individuals and families who are within 7 days of losing their housing either due to eviction from their own housing, ejection from housing owned or rented by others in which they are staying, or the end of a stay in a motel. But in order to minimize the trauma and disruption of the transition to a shelter or assisted housing, most families need more time to plan than just a week or less. For instance, in order to keep their kids from the setback of having to switch schools and to ensure that parents can find a location from which they can continue to reach their current jobs, additional time is necessary for families to seek homeless assistance. To do so, Moore would expand the definition of imminent homelessness so that families who are up to two weeks (14 days) away from losing their housing would be eligible to start seeking assistance right way, thereby giving them twice as much time to plan and make arrangements as they do under current law.

Lastly, this bill would give local homeless agencies greater resources and flexibility to directly help individuals at great housing risk in their community. Moore’s legislation would give localities additional flexibility to use federal homeless funds to prevent people with unstable housing situations from winding up on the street. Moore would double the Emergency Solutions program funding and require half of that account to be spent on homelessness prevention. Localities would further have the option of spending the entire Emergency Solutions account for these purposes, and could also opt to bolster those prevention efforts by additionally dedicating up to 10% of the rest of their overall homeless funding. All in all, up to 28% of homeless funds

in an area could be used to help those doubled-up or “couch surfing” in others’ homes try to achieve a more stable housing situation.

“Through the expansion of the definition of homelessness and increased local flexibility to prevent families from winding up on the street, the measure will give many more families access to vital resources that could allow them the chance to regain some level of stability,” Moore said.

Moore’s measure will also:

- Prevent family separation by requiring that any shelter or housing program that serves families with children to serve the entire family regardless of the children's ages;
- Give the Secretary of HUD the discretion to expand the definition of homelessness further based on such factors as prior residential instability; and
- Consolidate several existing programs into a single Continuum of Care program, thereby allowing local communities to apply to one program rather than three, and reducing the administrative burden and increasing flexibility and local decision-making.

The bill is expected to be taken up by the U.S. House of Representatives later this year.

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